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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BRATISLAVA 000786

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PGOV KIRF CACS SOCI LO

SUBJECT: MORMONS ATTEMPT TO REGISTER IN SLOVAKIA, GET KICKED OUT OF CATHOLIC ARCHBISHOP'S CITY

REF: BRATISLAVA 719

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¶11. (SBU) The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints submitted a petition to the Slovak government on September 26 with over 25,000 signatures of local residents who support the Church's official registration. (A religious body needs 20,000 signatures to register with the GOS.) In fact, the Mormons collected about 34,000 signatures, but 9,000 were unusable due to illegibility or incomplete addresses. Four Slovak leaders of the Mormon Church from Bratislava, Trenčín, and Zilina and their American legal counsel presented the signatures to the Director of the Department for Church Affairs at the Ministry of Culture, which processes church registrations.

#### POSSIBLE BARRIERS TO REGISTRATION

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¶12. (SBU) The LDS Church previously acquired a binding interpretation from the Ministry of Culture on the ambiguously-worded Slovak law on church registration. The Ministry affirmed that the signatories need only support the registration of the Church; they need not be adherents of the faith (reftel). Of greater concern to the LDS Church is the fact that one of the State Secretaries at the Culture Ministry belongs to the Slovak National Party (SNS), whose campaign platform included a pledge to make church registration more difficult.

¶13. (SBU) Theoretically, the registration process should take one month from submission of the signatures. At 20,000 signatories, Slovakia has one of the highest thresholds of required supporters in order for an entity to register as a religious organization. Slovak law also requires that the GOS provide certain financial support to registered religions, although the Mormon Church has said it would refuse the subsidies due to its own policies. Slovakia currently has 16 registered religions, 14 of which were grandfathered in before the law took effect. Major world religions such as Islam and Buddhism are not officially recognized in Slovakia due to the signatory requirement, although no one is prevented from practicing the faith of their choice.

#### HOW TO COLLECT 25000 SIGNATURES IN A MONTH

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¶14. (SBU) The Mormon Church conducted a month-long petition drive with volunteers on public streets and squares throughout Slovakia, hitting over 30 cities and towns. A lawyer for the LDS Church described the reaction to the signature-collectors as generally positive with a few notable exceptions. He said that people in Eastern Slovakia were friendlier and more likely to sign the petition than people

in the western part of the country. The petition garnered as many signatures in small towns as in large cities when measured in signatures per man-hour. Overall, with the exception of Trnava, the Mormon Church was pleased with their reception and success rate of the petition drive across the country.

KICKED OUT OF TRNAVA BY THE POLICE AND PICKETED BY NUNS

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¶5. (SBU) On September 22, the last day of the petition drive, the police in Trnava kicked 12 signature-gatherers (10 Americans, 1 German, 1 Austrian) out of the city. Local police officers told them that Mormons don't have rights there and that they would be fined if they didn't leave. As they already had enough signatures to satisfy the legal requirement, the Mormons chose to leave Trnava rather than make an issue of demanding their right to petition. (NOTE: Gathering signatures for a petition is legal in Slovakia. END NOTE.) Trnava is the seat of the Catholic Archbishop in Slovakia. The Catholic Church in Slovakia had issued a statement urging its members not to sign the petition. In Zilina, nuns with protest signs urged passers-by not to sign the Mormon petition. The Mormon Church's legal advisor noted that, also in Zilina, two older women were screaming at the petition gatherers and causing such a ruckus that one of the women was forcibly removed by the police.

¶6. (SBU) The lawyer mentioned a few isolated incidents of the petition-gatherers being shoved by locals, in one case allegedly by Jehovah's Witnesses, and one incident where someone threw a volunteer's clipboard into a nearby river. In no instance was anyone physically injured.

¶7. (SBU) The Ambassador will complain about the police treatment of petition-gatherers in Trnava at his upcoming courtesy call on the new Minister of Culture. We will also

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raise this issue and its human rights implications in a letter to the Minister of Interior.

VALLEE